# THE SECOND CONVERSION

October 18, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Isaiah 58:6-9
Luke 16:14, 19-31

**"Is not this the fast that I choose:... to share your bread with the hungry...bring the homeless poor into your house;... Then your light shall break forth like the dawn.**

-Isaiah 58:6-8 (NRSV)

It would be neither faithful nor relevant to read that passage of scripture this morning from a pulpit in Chicago, Illinois and not mention the name Dantrell Davis.

If you are a guest from out of town and have not been reading the Chicago papers and watching television, you may not know that on Tuesday a first grader, seven-year-old Dantrell Davis was shot and killed as his mother walked him to the Jenner Elementary School in the Cabrini Green housing complex - a few blocks west of here.

It's not that it never happened before. In fact, there is a sense in which it happens so much that people in Chicago cope with it by not paying attention, by pushing it and all it represents, out of our thinking. And that is why it is not faithful to read what I just read and not acknowledge it.

Dantrell was the third Jenner Elementary School student killed since March of this year. 120 children under 18 years of age have been shot and killed in Chicago this year. How do you deal with that except by repressing it, denying it?

The city is talking about it at the moment. The Chicago Sun Times, on the front page this time, told the story and in an extraordinarily responsible gesture, asked the whole community to become responsible for what happened and for the resolution to the war which is raging on our streets.

Dantrell Davis was killed by a man who had in his possession a very efficient weapon; a semi-automatic, military assault rifle, equipped with a long distance scope which allows you to see and to kill the enemy from distances of hundreds of yards.

People who care about Dantrell and the 119 other of our children might begin by simply asking why, in the name of God, is it that semi-automatic assault rifles with laser telescopic sights are available? Why, in the name of God, have we allowed this nation, this beautiful city, to be turned into an armed camp?

Of course, there are complex socio-economic reasons why children of poverty die. And, of course, guns are not the reason people turn to violence. But why, we might ask this morning, have we made it so easy; and then when tragedy happens, why do we avert our eyes? Dr. Morgan Simmons, our Organist and Choirmaster, and the members of the morning choir have asked that their Offertory Anthem become our Fourth Presbyterian Church Memorial to Dantrell Davis and all the other children who have been killed.

Won't you take a few moments today and join me by writing the National Rifle Association and pleading, in the name of God, for that very powerful lobby to change its opposition to the control and elimination from our streets of semi-automatic military weapons? And then won't you write two senators and your congressional representatives and the White House and urge support of the Brady Bill, a very modest measure, and beyond Brady, serious gun control?

It was Mark Twain, you know, who said that he wasn't bothered by what he couldn't understand about the Bible. It was what he understood perfectly well that really bothered him.

I have never preached on the passage of scripture which we just heard. I didn't consciously avoid it, but when it came up in the Lectionary readings in the past, I found a convenient reason not to use it. Perhaps my avoidance was not coincidental. This story makes me very uncomfortable.

My discomfort was amplified by the death of Dantrell Davis, and by a book a friend gave me. It is by the distinguished economist and former editor of Fortune Magazine, John Kenneth Galbraith. The title of the book is The Culture of Contentment. The friend who sent it to me wrote inside the front cover: "I'm sure you will read this with interest." He was right. I did. It was interesting and very disturbing. Galbraith makes no illusions to the Bible or religion, but his book and the little story Jesus told one day about a rich man and a poor man are about the same thing.

Briefly, Galbraith maintains that American culture in the past several decades has become a culture run by, and for, people who have become comfortably contented. Their characteristics are: one, a sense of entitlement - they deserve their affluence.

Two, the culture of contentment thinks consistently short term rather than long term. Three, contented people regard government programs to assist the less fortunate as an unnecessary burden, but government subsidies and support of their own affluence, a right. And contented people are amazingly tolerant of a new and frightening income gap between rich people and poor people.

It is not a cheerful book. But it is an honest and incisive book, and reading it at the same time I was working on Luke 16 in preparation for this sermons was, to say the least, disturbing.

Now - let's take a look at the Luke material. There is no topic more important to Luke than the relationship between people and their possessions. There is a lot in Luke about it. In the passage before us Jesus has just told a story about a creative but unscrupulous manager and has admired his ingenuity. And then said something striking: "You cannot serve God and wealth."

And the Pharisees, the religious and social elite, the establishment, who were also relatively well-to-do - not wealthy generally, but certainly not poor - the Pharisees scoffed at him, laughed, ridiculed him. "Did you hear that? An unemployed carpenter telling us what's right and wrong about the economic system. He'd do better to stick to religion."

They ridiculed him because they loved money, Luke says.

And it was that scoffing, I think, which prompts Jesus to tell this disturbing little story. The characters are caricatures: a rich man, dressed in the finest Egyptian linen, dining sumptuously daily, and a poor man, whose name is Lazarus, the poorest of the poor, sick, helpless, lying in his own filth. Both men die. The rich man is buried and goes to Hades where he is tormented. Lazarus is carried by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man prays to God for mercy. "Send Lazarus so that he can cool my tongue with a drop of water." Abraham refuses. "At least send someone to warn my brothers," he pleads. Abraham refuses. End of the story.

The trick is to understand it without disarming it. The rich man seems to be guilty of some terrible offense simply because he is rich. But that doesn't compute. Luke is not on the topic of income equalization. There are people of means in his Gospel, portrayed positively. In Luke, wealth can be used creatively and helpfully. So there is something going on here more complex than a simple condemnation of wealth.

Keep your eyes on those Pharisees who laughed at Jesus because they love money. The story is for them. It is not a description of heaven and hell, and it is not a critique of all wealthy people. It is a sharp commentary on a group of misguided people who were in the process of missing the glory and meaning

of their own lives... and the reason was their commitment to their possessions - their contentment, if you will.

Professor Galbraith says contented people are convinced that they are entitled to their affluence. The Pharisees believed that if you had it, you deserved it. And if you didn't have it, you didn't deserve it. They could quote the Bible, the book of Deuteronomy, to the effect that wealth was a sign of God's favor and poverty a sure sign of God's judgment. The mind-set and social system of which they were a part, over which they presided, in fact, assigned wealthy people to heaven and poor people to hell on theological grounds, and then treated them consistently with that theology.

One of the wonderful and important details about this story is that the poor man is the only character in all the parables Jesus told who has a name, Lazarus. And the reason is that the culture did not have a name for him. The poor were intentionally marginalized, kept away from the Temple; for instance, Lazarus is a non-person, a statistic, an economic problem. And that - the fact that these wealthy people don't even know his name, don't care about his name, don't even acknowledge his membership in the human family, and then use their religion to justify it - really makes Jesus angry, I think. He wants to say something so shocking it will get their attention, which he does, I think.

The love of money according to Jesus, not money, but the love of money, is a kind of primal sickness, a complex condition which affects all people.

I can still hear an aunt of mine saying frequently to my parents, "There's nothing wrong with me that a five pound box of money wouldn't fix." Who doesn't think that way sometimes? One of the more bizarre activities during time-out at a Bulls game used to be a lucky person, chosen by lottery who was placed in a glass booth; a fan was turned on and hundreds of dollar bills were dropped into the booth and swirled and twirled wildly. The idea was to snatch as much as you can in 60 seconds. It was awful, but everybody watched because everybody wondered what that might be like.

Those who look at the culture carefully seem to agree that our materialism, our consumerism, our devotion to our toys, our stuff, our possessions, is out of hand. There is an ad for a simulated car phone. If you can't afford a telephone for your car, $5.00 will get you a simulated phone for use while you are driving. In a fascinating Wall Street Journal interview recently, John Updike spoke about the spiritual emptiness he sees in the heart of the nation.

Updike has written four novels about Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom - Rabbit Run, Rabbit Redux, Rabbit is Rich, Rabbit at Rest.

Rabbit runs but never arrives; lives hard and fast, drinks and eats too much, but is never satisfied. He is a victim, not of limits, but of dreams. Updike says there is never enough for him. Happiness, satisfaction, even God elude him. He says, "Somewhere behind all this, there's something that wants me to find it."

It's what's wrong with us, Updike believes, and he observed:

> "The number of already very rich men who were willing to commit crimes during the 80s to get even richer proved there was not enough. Maybe that's one of the words Americans have a very hard time hearing: the word 'enough.'"

And then he made the observation so many others have made - namely that there seems to be a relationship between material abundance and spiritual emptiness.

T. S. Eliot wrote about it a generation ago:

> "And the world shall say: Here were decent godless people. Their only monument the asphalt road, and a thousand lost golf balls." [The Rock]

Jesus said you can't love God and money.

If the moralists and preachers and novelists can't get our attention, maybe the economists can.

Galbraith thinks we are headed for disaster, and its clearest symbol is a frightening new development: a greatly expanded, seemingly permanent underclass; people who do not work, do not vote, who have learned to live without hope for much change; who have simply dropped out, or have been dropped out - a new caste system. Galbraith calls it a secession from the nation, more dangerous than the confederacy. And it is symbolized perhaps most dramatically by an enormously increased crime rate. Basic, minimal respect for law is gone. Alex Kotlowitz, talking to our tutors two weeks ago said the frightening new twist to the recent increase in gang activity in the projects is that while gangs have always fought with one another and kept a respectful distance from the police, there now seems to be a general declaration of war against the whole of society.

Love of money is a disease that affects those who have it and those who don't, says New Testament scholar, Fred Craddock. And Jim Wallis, pastor and community organizer in Washington, D.C., describes the way the disease affects particularly the poor. Looking out the window he observes:

> "In our neighborhood children 8, 9, 10 years old wear beepers. It is not because they are young doctors or lawyers, but because drug dealers call the children at play when a drug run has to be made. Kids can make more money in a day or week than they can ever imagine."

Wallis, who keeps the church and faith on the front lines, observes:

> "...the irony of the children of the poor pursuing the same glitzy materialistic dream as the others, in the quickest and perhaps only way open to them... Ironically, highly paid entertainers and athletes become the role models encouraging young African-American children to reject the big money they can make in drug traffic and settle for minimum wage." [Envisioning the New City: A Reader in Urban Ministry, p. 52]

It irritated Jesus when people of privilege and influence, intelligent people who knew how to get things done, refused to use their power and influence for anything other than their own amusement, or contentment. It irritated him, not only because it was not fair to the unfortunate, the weak, the outsiders, but more importantly it was responsible for spiritual emptiness in their own lives. They weren't living very fully, actually. The rich man in hell was his metaphor for a life lived without love and compassion and caring for other human beings.

There is, that is to say, a second conversion, in the Christian religion. To turn to Jesus, without - at the same time - turning to your neighbor, is to miss the point. It is not to turn fully to Jesus.

In an important new book, Truth to Tell, The Gospel as Public Truth, Leslie Newbegin writes:

> "From the beginning we are warned that what follows will require nothing less than a radical conversion of the mind... a radical rearrangement of our mental furniture."

I like that - conversion as a "radical rearranging of our mental furniture." And may I presume to suggest that the mental furniture that needs rearranging and which we most resist rearranging, has to do with how we regard other people, particularly the poor.

Howard Rice put it eloquently, I thought.

> "Any experience of Christ that does not lead us to share his passionate concern for others is misunderstood or simply imagined, no matter how powerful it may be." [Reformed Spirituality]

The Pharisees had missed it. They had become selective readers of the Bible. Had they read on they would have encountered Isaiah:

> "Is not this the fast I choose...
> to let the oppressed go free...
> to share your bread with the hungry...
> to bring the homeless poor into your home...
> when you see the naked to cover him."

Jesus gave the poor man a name. That was his point. The religion and politics and economics of the Pharisees kept the poor man anonymous - kept them from knowing him as a child of God and denied him, robbed him of his God-given dignity. And this is important - their attitude toward the poor kept them from seeing Jesus Christ fully.

The Chicago Sun-Times urged readers to demand of politicians, police, educators and clergy an accounting about Dantrell Davis. So let me tell you that we try to give people names here.

That's what we ask one another to support with our prayers, our encouragement, our time and our money.

Tereatha Akbar, our Director of Educational Outreach and the Tutoring Program, explained it this way:

> "Sometimes," Mrs. Akbar said, "tutors become discouraged. They are bright, well-educated, highly motivated, full of optimism and altruism; they sit down with their ten-year-old student from Cabrini Green, start asking questions - 'How was school today? What do you think about this? How do you feel about that? Do you like math?' And they get no response. 'Do you like sports, what kind? Do you like rap music?' - a shrug of the shoulders is all they get. They come to her and they say, 'Mrs. Akbar, my student doesn't like me. He or she won't talk, won't even answer my questions.'"

And Mrs. Akbar patiently explains that for many of these children, being asked a question, being asked an opinion or how they feel about anything is a totally alien experience. In ten years no one ever asked them about their feelings; no one ever asked if they had feelings.

So tutoring, in addition to helping with reading and writing and arithmetic, tries to help children know that they have names, that they are valued, loved members of the human family, children of God, even.

When a child was shot in Cabrini Green, 350 Fourth Presbyterian Church tutors held their breath until they knew that it was not their student. It is why we do what we do here - welcome the homeless into our Social Service Center; and give jackets and coats and underwear, and sandwiches... and it is why people from this church go to the County Jail and tutor and the County Hospital to comfort and cheer. We are intentional in devising ways for interaction between people to happen: 25 mothers of Tutoring youngsters were guests for dinner in the Manse Friday; and on Saturday mornings people gather here to go to Cabrini Green and scrub and paint walls side by side with the people who live there. One of the buildings in which we have worked was Dantrell Davis' home. And it is why people go to Central America and build houses and it is why we persist in asking one another to give, and care, and share, and provide.

Why are we doing all this, I am asked on occasion. A visitor from Great Britain was distressed by the frantic pace and the constant pushing he experienced in this parish. I ask it myself. Why not have a wonderful Sunday worship service with gorgeous music and tell people that God loves them and that they are beautiful and special, and let it go at that? It sounds very good at times! And the reason we don't: the reason we seem almost obsessive about outreach and mission: the reason there is hardly a Sunday that we aren't asking you to give your money to something, or volunteer your time for something: the reason is that to not do it is to miss the power of the Gospel. To cast the Gospel in one dimensional terms is to miss it altogether. To proclaim God's inclusive love for us without proclaiming the inclusive, passionate love for others to which God's love calls us is to cheat ourselves.

The Second Conversion...

The first is that time, that moment, or hour, or year, or that process which began long ago and continues to evolve, by which we came to know Jesus Christ, came to terms with a God who loves us as a mother and father love their own children and, as a parent, who wants us to be and become all we can be, wants much, much more for us than contentment; a God who longs for relationship; a God who comes into our lives with creative energy and looks for ways to heal and reconcile, forgive and make us whole; sometimes a shattering experience, more often a quiet growing over the years, but always - for all of us - almost indescribably profound.

And the Second Conversion...having turned inward, to meet the Lord of our heart and soul, now turning outward with our hands and arms open, to meet our neighbor, to meet particularly the one who needs us.

And in the turning - to come alive, to know that we do God's will; in love and service, to be what God created us to be; to know the name of the one who needs us; to never rest, never be content until the day when all God's children have names, when there is peace and freedom and justice and fullness of life for all; that day, the prophet promised, when your light shall break forth like the dawn.